Smuggling and states along a Southeast Asian frontier

What is the nature of commodities in transit as they move across unstable spaces like international boundaries? How do time, geography, and culture influence whether or not goods are considered to be contraband? Who gets involved in smuggling, and why? Is involvement influenced by ethnicity, language, and class? How do states 'see' – especially along their frontiers? And what strategies do smugglers use to outwit the state's normally superior resources?

Eric Tagliacozzo

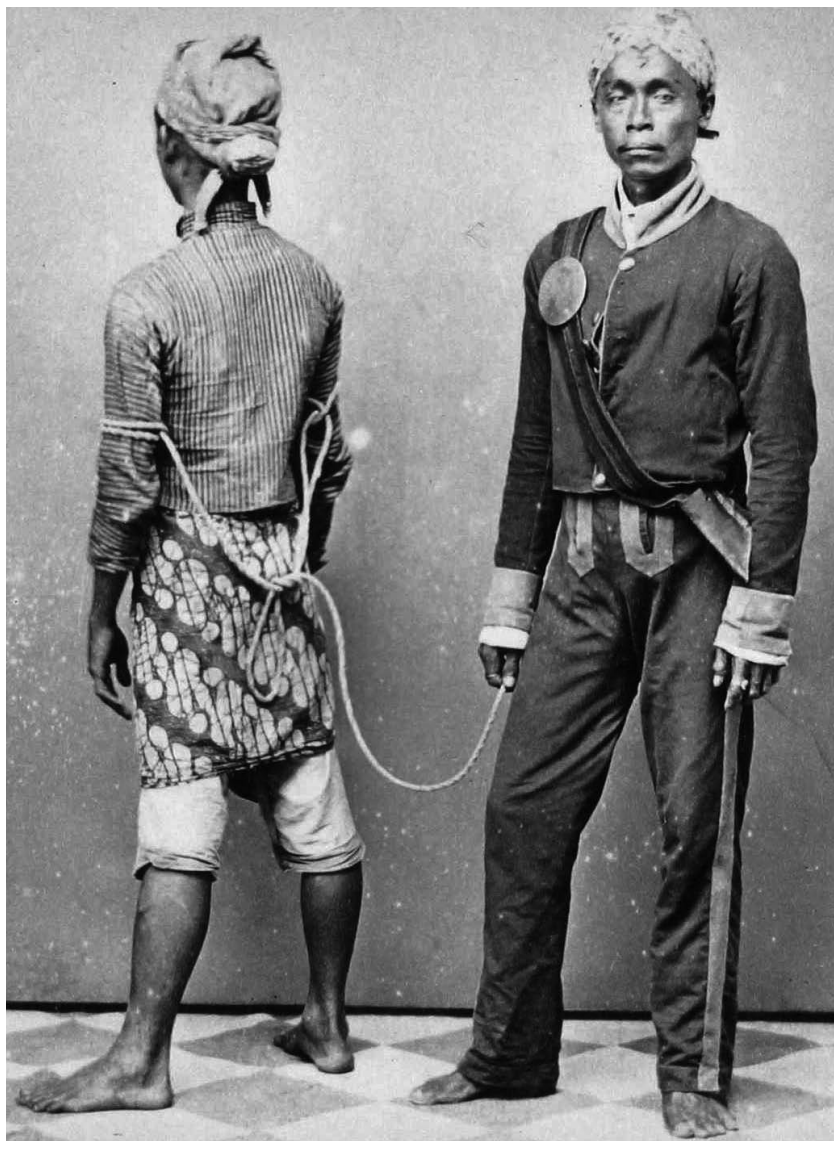
The development of a border between the British and Dutch colonial regimes in Southeast Asia was intimately linked with smuggling across their frontier. While advances in technology and organisation enhanced European abilities to create and maintain borders during the period 1865-1915, western, and particularly Dutch fears of the 'wild space' of frontier areas never really waned over the course of this period.

Smuggling in its many manifestations (of drugs, arms, people, and currency, for example) had much to do with this paradoxical dynamic. Though these states waged fairly successful wars against certain 'secret trades' (such as counterfeit currency), other goods such as narcotics were never controlled during these 50 years. Other contraband commodities including human beings, in the form of prostitutes, coolies, and slaves, metamorphosed over time and more or less went underground. The Anglo/Dutch border, created and strengthened by modernising colonial states, was rife with smuggling; stated another way, boundary-production and boundary-transgression were two sides of the same coin.

Evidence in fragments

The story of smuggling across the sensitive and evolving Anglo-Dutch border in Southeast Asia is complex, and available information is fragmentary at best. Grand economic and political narratives do not tell the full story. To get an idea of how borders and smuggling actually interacted on the ground, we need to look at individual people and specific places: testimonials of Chinese woodcutters who were trafficked to coastal Sumatra; witness statements of men whose ships were pirated off the shore of Aceh; data on morphine seizures in Penang in 1906; the waters around the island of Bangka, which reveal evolving imperial hydrographical abilities at the turn of the century. While the physical locus of smuggling along the Anglo/Dutch boundary was local, radials of this commerce penetrated to far away places – Java and Timor, and even China, Arabia and Japan. The Anglo-Dutch frontier in colonial Southeast Asia was a swirling maelstrom of people, landscapes and connections that bound the region into a new grid, and maintained links outside of it at the same time.

The entirety of this illicit commerce might be called 'undertrading': the passage of goods underneath – or at the legal and geographic interstices of – the majority of items traded in the area. Undertrading had a phased existence, with certain products and ports passing in and out of the 'undertrade' category. Items in these waters were not designated as contraband simply on ontological grounds. Rather, historical moments dictated to colonial governments whether it was in their interest to designate products as illegal. Thus guns, unfarmed opium and human beings (such as prostitutes and slaves) were often classified as contraband; other commodities, including pepper, porcelain, and even bulk shipments of rice, were only sometimes listed so. Specific ports could likewise be declared open to trade or strictly off-limits. Such decisions encouraged a brisk flow of officially 'illicit' goods – either in newly illegal items or to newly illegal places.



Indies policeman and criminal, 1870
KITLV, Leiden

Spaces of dissent

Some spaces were judged to be better than others for smuggling, giving rise to a geography of contrabanding. Historically, undertrading has flourished in borderlands and peripheries; at natural choke points, such as mountain passes and narrow waterways; and in urban confusion, where the state has difficulty seeing through the frenzy of activity. Singapore – situated along the narrow waterway of the Straits and being a maritime border town – was a perfect focal point for smuggling. The city was also a crucial haven for smugglers because of its size and chaotic complexity. Here the vision and reach of the state, supposedly at its strongest at the seat of regional imperial power, was limited. There were never enough coast guard cutters and police; there were always too many sampans and dark alleys. When the coercive power of government caught up with local smugglers, the latter resisted by using small, fast sailing craft, false shipping papers, hidden cargo spaces and loopholes in the law.

Smuggling also took place in the networks of corruption and private interest that riddled the state in the form of its own civil servants. The collaboration of civil servants was often crucial to the success of contrabanding as they could ensure that the gaze of the state turned elsewhere at the appropriate time. This happened in both the British and Dutch spheres in 19th century Southeast Asia. Yet it is difficult to find records of these liaisons, as both colonial powers had much invested in their regimes' supposed moral superiority, at least in the face of their subject populations. Nevertheless, corruption on the part of civil servants was an important part of the history of contrabanding.

Who were the smugglers?

Who smuggled commodities in colonial Southeast Asia? It would not be an exaggeration to answer 'just about everyone': Chinese populations of various sub-groupings and linguistic affiliations, 'Malays', Bugis, Dayaks, Japanese, 'Sea Gypsies' and Europeans all took their turn. Re-distributing commodities to subordinates to ensure vassalage was common throughout the region. The stakes for trading or smuggling successfully were high: ensuring the flow of goods could mean the difference between maintaining one's power or losing it to rivals. Many could participate as the overhead needed for smuggling was often very low – a boat, some provisions, and local knowledge of tides, sandbars, and winds. With the imposition of powerful European states in the late 19th century, many local people did indeed try to make money in this way.

Such forms of state-designated criminality and resistance against ruling regimes have taken on many guises in human history. If James Scott is right in that the peasantry had everyday ways to resist state and elite exactions, how much more was this the case for merchants and long-distance traders? Possessing capital and distant contacts which peasants lacked – and a mobility that was part and parcel of their occupation – merchants (and the corrupt officials who were very often their allies) found many ways to resist the tightening strictures of government, especially by smuggling. Some traders were merely continuing age-old commodity lines that only now were designated as contrabanding by governments. Others saw the new imposition of borders and rigidified controls as an opportunity to make money. Many passed from being colonial compradors into outlaws, though some of the smartest seem to have been able to occupy both niches at once. <

For further reading

- Tagliacozzo, Eric. 2005. *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Eric Tagliacozzo
History Department
Cornell University
et54@cornell.edu